

The cover of Current Biography magazine features a photograph of two men lying on a grassy lawn. One man is lying on his back, wearing a red and black striped long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, looking directly at the camera. The other man is lying on his side, wearing glasses and a dark jacket, also looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a building.

Current Biography®

VOLUME 69
NUMBER 3
MARCH 2008

Flight of the Conchords
musical-comedy duo

Also in this issue:

Lois Capps

U.S. congresswoman

Kori Newkirk

artist

Slash

rock guitarist

And many more...

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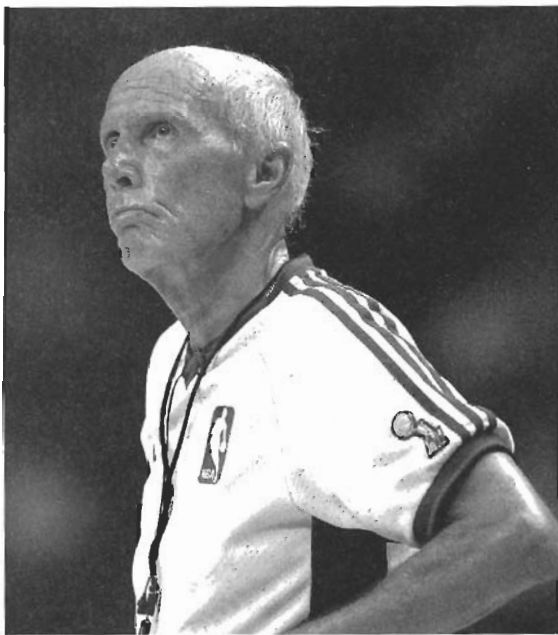
Cover: The New Zealanders Jemaine Clement (left) and Bret McKenzie—known together as Flight of the Conchords—have gained a significant cult following for their dry, understated comedic style and their acoustic parodies of a wide spectrum of musical genres. *Photo:* Sam Erickson, courtesy of Sub Pop Records

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Current MARCH 2008 Biography[®]

Dick Bavetta, a 33-year veteran of the National Basketball Association (NBA), has been called “the Cal Ripken Jr. of referees”—a reference to the durable Baltimore Orioles shortstop and third baseman—for his longevity in the field of officiating. Bavetta is one of the most recognizable and well-liked figures in a profession usually characterized by anonymity. “I understand my role. I’m a grade-B actor. The players are the stars, and the game is the production. I’m like the guy you see on the street. You know the face but not the name. I’ve always accepted that,” he noted to David DuPree for *USA Today* (February 20, 2004). Since he began his tenure in the NBA, during the 1975–76 season, he has never missed an assigned game, and he currently holds the record for most officiated games in the league’s history, with more than 2,200. Throughout his 33 seasons, he has consistently been among the NBA’s highest-rated officials and has refereed 228 play-off games and 24 NBA Finals games. Bavetta’s journey to the top of the NBA’s officiating ranks was not an easy one. While refereeing games in the semiprofessional Eastern League (the forerunner of the Continental Basketball Association), he was accepted by the NBA only after having tried out unsuccessfully in the previous nine seasons. It took him another 11 years to be assigned to his first play-off game. Now a postseason fixture, Bavetta has since gained a reputation for being one of the most efficient and knowledgeable officials in the league, in addition to being “a favorite among coaches for his willingness to admit, after a game, that he might have blown a call or two,” as noted by David Firestone for the *New York Times* (December 4, 1998). Garry St. Jean, a former coach and former general manager of the Golden State Warriors, explained to Firestone, “He’s not just one of the top referees in the game. He’s also the guy who will dance with the mascots, and give the ball to a 5-year-old at his first game during a time out, and say hello by name to the ball boys and equipment managers. He just makes you light up when you see him on the floor.”

The younger of two sons, Richard T. Bavetta was born on December 10, 1939 in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn, New York. His father was a lieutenant in the New York Police Department; his mother was a homemaker. His older brother, Joe, became a police detective. Bavetta attended Power Memorial High School, where he played basketball.



Ronald Martinez/Getty Images

Bavetta, Dick

*Dec. 10, 1939—
National Basketball
Association referee*

*Address: National
Basketball Referees
Association, c/o
Perennial Strategy
Group, 1455
Pennsylvania Ave.,
N.W., Suite 225,
Washington, DC
20004*

"I understand my role. I'm a grade-B actor. The players are the stars, and the game is the production. I'm like the guy you see on the street. You know the face but not the name. I've always accepted that."

(Power Memorial became a basketball juggernaut in the 1960s, when Lew Alcindor—later known as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar—led the school's team to three straight New York City Catholic championships and a 72-game winning streak.) Bavetta continued to play basketball at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, where he graduated with a degree in economics in 1962. Commenting on his playing skills, Bavetta noted to DuPree, "I was mediocre, at best. I didn't even make the travel team. I just played in the home games." After receiving his M.B.A. degree from the New York Institute of Finance, he started working as a stockbroker for the Wall Street brokerage firm Salomon Brothers. At night he played basketball in a Wall Street league at New York's Downtown Athletic Club. After Joe Bavetta, who doubled as a part-time basketball official, refereed one of his younger brother's games, Dick Bavetta was coaxed into officiating at a game along with him. He was instantly hooked.

In 1966 Bavetta signed up for a 10-week officiating class in order to get certified for youth-league games. He began refereeing games in public and parochial high-school leagues at night and later worked games in the semiprofessional Eastern League on the weekends. The Eastern League paid him only \$45 per game and did not compensate him for expenses. "People were looking for me, wondering why I wasn't at work on Tuesdays and Fridays. That's because they played Catholic and public high school games at 3:30 in the afternoon on those days . . .," he recalled to DuPree. "I'd leave Brooklyn on a Saturday afternoon, drive to Pennsylvania and work one night in Scranton and the next night in Wilkes-Barre, finishing the last game at 10 o'clock Sunday night, knowing I had to be back on Wall Street at 7 the next morning." Longing for a chance to officiate in the NBA, he started attending regional tryouts at camps for NBA officials. Though he wrote numerous letters to league officials in the hope that they would consider him for a referee job, Bavetta was rejected for nine straight years. Then, in 1975, the NBA hired him following the retirement of the legendary Mendy Rudolph (the first league referee to officiate at 2,000 games). Bavetta, who is five feet 11 inches tall and a lean 156 pounds, has cited his unimposing size as one of the main factors that had kept the NBA from taking him on. He explained to Terry Pluto for the Akron, Ohio, *Beacon Journal* (February 9, 1997), "They used to like their officials to be big guys. Guys whom you'd see for the first time and you'd have instant respect. Look at me? Tell me what you see?"

Although his dream had been realized, Bavetta's new career resulted in a 50 percent pay cut, an extensive travel schedule, and less time spent with his family, which included two daughters. His wife, Francis, was opposed to his career change, and the two divorced just before he joined the NBA. (They remained friends.) "I don't blame her," Bavetta said to Pluto. "She is a great girl. When we married, she thought I was going to be a stockbroker, working 9 to 5." Bavetta made his NBA debut on December 2, 1975 at New York's Madison Square Garden, in a regular-season game between the New York Knicks and the Boston Celtics. His first 10 years in the league proved to be the toughest of his career. Calling his officiating skills during that period "marginal, at best," Bavetta consistently ranked in the bottom third among officials

in performance evaluations and led NBA referees in technical fouls called and ejections of players. (Officials prone to calling frequent technical fouls and making ejections are often disregarded by players and coaches, which, in turn, often leads them to amass even higher totals in those categories.) As a result, he was not assigned to play-off games. He recalled to Pluto, "Every year, I sweated it out, wondering if they'd rehire me. . . . I was fighting for respect out there." While impressing NBA executives was difficult for him, he discovered that it was even harder to win respect from his peers. During a late-1970s game between the Philadelphia 76ers and the New Jersey Nets, when Bavetta overruled a last-minute call made by his colleague Earl Strom, reversing the outcome of the game, Strom physically assaulted him. Pluto noted that during that time, a *Boston Globe* journalist—referring to the rail-thin, incompetent deputy played by Don Knotts on the *Andy Griffith Show* and to a famous prison uprising—wrote that "sending Dick Bavetta to ref a big game is like sending Barney Fife to quell the Attica riots." Nonetheless determined to succeed, Bavetta dedicated himself to becoming a better official. In the off-season he refereed games on the Jersey Shore for the New Jersey summer pro league and games in the famed Rucker League in New York's Harlem neighborhood, in which he recalls being the only white official. "The guys in Harlem probably thought I was either the best official in the world or completely crazy to keep going back, year-after-year," he quipped to Pluto. In addition to officiating games seven days a week, he acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of the NBA rulebook.

Bavetta's two daughters, Christine and Michelle, willing to share what he has called his "vagabond lifestyle," came to live with him in 1980, while they were in their teens. Getting a second chance at fatherhood proved to be a pivotal development in Bavetta's life. "Reflecting back, I was just ordinary, a mediocre official at best," he explained to DuPree. "But when Christine and Michelle came to live with me, they provided a purpose for me, and things just started taking off. . . . It was almost that they provided stability. I thought at the time that I'd teach them about life, but they taught me." In 1983 he became the first official to undergo a training regimen in the off-season. (Normally, officials, who on average run five to eight miles in a game, would wait until mid-summer to get into shape.) He began running six to eight miles every morning (even on game days) and taking three-hour "power" naps in the afternoons. He also started wearing up to five pairs of socks at a time during games, because, as he later recalled to Sarah Lorge Butler for *Runner's World* (June 2007, on-line), "My feet were getting sore from the running. . . . So during the summer, I said, let me just experiment, add a couple of pairs of socks. I always used to wear two or three anyway. So I just added two more pairs of socks. Felt comfortable with five. Wasn't too restrictive to my feet. Went to a half size bigger [shoe]. I said, as long as I'm not missing games. Might be missing calls, but I'm not missing games, I'm going to stick with this. So it's been a comfortable existence for me and a healthy existence for me."

During the 1980s Bavetta became an officiating crew chief and quickly developed a reputation as one of the best-conditioned referees in the league. (Determined by seniority, crew chiefs are in charge of basketball games; calls by other officials are either approved or overruled by them.) He was assigned to his first play-off game in 1986. (NBA officials are now required to have a minimum of seven years' experience before they can referee games in the postseason. In addition, prior to 1988 each NBA game was officiated by a two-person crew with a staff of 35, an arrangement that made it difficult for referees to cover every area of the basketball court in time, which often diminished crews' play-calling efficiency—given the high speed of the game and the athleticism of the players; that year the National Basketball Referees Association, or NBRA, instituted three-person crews and expanded each staff to 60, in an effort to recruit younger prospects.) One of Bavetta's most memorable experiences as a referee occurred on November 9, 1984, in a nationally televised game between the Celtics and their rivals the 76ers. Beginning early in the third quarter, Bavetta was forced to officiate by himself, after his crewmate Jack Madden broke his leg in a collision with the Celtics guard Dennis Johnson. Then, midway through the fourth quarter, the Celtics forward Larry Bird and 76ers forward Julius "Dr. J." Erving—considered two of the greatest players of all time—were ejected for punching one another during a bench-clearing brawl. Bavetta recalled to Liz Robbins for the *New York Times* (February 5, 2006), "I guess the N.B.A. figured, 'If this guy could handle this, he could handle anything.'" Later in the decade Bavetta had a second altercation with Earl Strom: the veteran official choked him in the dressing room during halftime of a 1989 game for allegedly being a "homer," a derogatory term for officials who side with home crowds. (Early in Bavetta's career, his officiating often seemed to favor the winning team or to be influenced by the crowd.) Strom reportedly apologized to Bavetta two weeks after the incident.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Bavetta went from being a "homer" to being seen as the league's best "road ref." A fixture in the postseason, he consistently ranked among the highest-rated officials in terms of performance evaluation. In addition to being an authoritative call-maker and rulebook expert, he became especially known for his willingness to admit mistakes. In the early 1990s Bavetta and his officiating crews started a post-game routine of meeting in his hotel room each night to evaluate their performance on videotape, offering one another criticism. "My thing is communication," he explained to Pluto, who described him as "the perfect official." Bavetta added, "I believe in talking to people, letting them know why we called something. Early in my career, that was considered a sign of weakness. Most of the older officials said, 'Just make the call. You don't have to explain anything. If they don't like it, T-them up [call a technical foul].' But that has never been my personality." Discussing Bavetta's skills as a communicator—which include the ability to defuse tension—his fellow official Bennett Salvatore explained to DuPree, "That's his greatest strength. He's very approachable, and his body language says, 'You can come talk to me,' and after that, he listens. . . . He evaluates the situation and then responds

in one of three ways. He either does it with a very stern answer, with humor or he'll give you an answer from left field. . . . You can be yelling at him and your emotions are running high and he'll listen to you and then say, 'By the way, did you see that sumo wrestling show the other day?' and then he'll walk away. The player or coach is left standing there thinking, 'This guy is nuts.'" During one game, when the player Charles Barkley tried to contest one of his calls, Bavetta, who happened to know that Barkley was a soap-opera fan, managed to avoid a confrontation with him by shifting the conversation to the character Erica Kane (played by Susan Lucci) on the daytime drama *All My Children*.

By the early 2000s, Bavetta had become not only one of the most respected but also one of the highest-paid referees in the league, earning upwards of \$200,000 per year. In 2003 Bavetta's consecutive-game streak, which was nearing 2,000, was put in jeopardy when the Indiana Pacers forward Jalen Rose accidentally punched him in the nose during a game against the New York Knicks. (The punch was intended for the Knicks' center Patrick Ewing.) Instead of leaving the game, Bavetta opted to have his nose surgically repaired after the contest, then returned the next day to referee a New Jersey Nets game. In February 2004, in a game between the Knicks and the Utah Jazz, he became only the fourth NBA referee in the league's history to officiate 2,000 games—and the first to do so in consecutive contests. (Prior to achieving the milestone, Bavetta noted that he had never particularly paid attention to such records.) When he refereed his 2,135th game, on February 8, 2006, he broke Jake O'Donnell's record for the most games officiated in the history of the NBA, making him the official "gold standard for basketball referees," as noted by a writer for PR Newswire (February 7, 2006). The same writer added, "What makes Bavetta's record even more intriguing is that his 2,135 games will have been consecutive."

The following season, on December 16, 2006, Bavetta made headlines after ejecting a record 10 players in response to a brawl that took place during a game between the Knicks and the Denver Nuggets. To date Bavetta has officiated at more than 2,200 regular-season games, 228 play-off games, and 24 NBA Finals games. Garry St. Jean said to DuPree about Bavetta, "He epitomizes everything we want our game to be. He just has a way about him. He loves his job, and it exudes from him. He makes you feel confident. When he's the ref, you can concentrate on the game and not have to worry about the officiating."

Dick Bavetta is a "people person" with a "marvelous sense of humor," according to DuPree. He lives in Ocala, Florida, with his wife, and has an additional home in Lake George, New York, where he frequently works out in the off-season. In addition to his NBA duties, Bavetta has done extensive charitable work. During the 2007 NBA All-Star Weekend, he took part in a short-distance charity race against the former player and current Turner Network Television (TNT) studio analyst Charles Barkley; the event helped to raise \$75,000 for the Las Vegas, Nevada, chapter of the Boys and Girls Club of America. Since 1986 he has financed the Bavetta Scholarships, which offer parochial

SUGGESTED READING:

- ABC News Transcripts* (on-line)
Feb. 10, 2006
- (Akron, Ohio) *Beacon Journal* H p2+ Feb. 9, 1997
- New York Times* B p2
Dec. 4, 1998, p2 Feb. 5, 2006
- PR Newswire *US*
Feb. 7, 2006
- Runner's World* p132
June 2007
- USA Today* C p1+
Feb. 20, 2004

high-school scholarships to minority girls and underprivileged children. He is a member of the board of directors of the Double H-Hole in the Woods Ranch, located in upstate New York, where he has worked since 1992 with critically ill children with cancer or HIV. He is also the upstate New York regional director for the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation. At 68, he shows no signs of slowing down, explaining to Robbins, "I still feel like I'm celebrating my 16th birthday. I'm blessed with good health— why not keep doing it?"

—C.C.



Alex Wong/Getty Images

Blunt, Roy

Jan. 10, 1950— U.S. representative from Missouri (Republican); House minority whip

Address: 217 Cannon House Office Bldg., Washington, D.C. 20515

In November 2002, when Roy Blunt of Missouri was unanimously elected majority whip of the U.S. House of Representatives by his fellow Republican members of that body, his predecessor, the newly elected House majority leader, Tom DeLay, presented him with a velvet-covered hammer. The gift was meant to signify the difference between the two politicians: DeLay, nicknamed "The Hammer," had a reputation for strong-arming colleagues into voting along party lines, while Blunt, who had served as DeLay's chief deputy, was seen as softer and more compassionate. "The velvet hammer hurts just as much," Blunt told Deirdre Shesgreen for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (November 17, 2002), hinting that he had no intention of coddling House legislators. "It's just not as loud." Blunt has said that his easy-going approach is effective in carrying out his main responsibility, which is to drum up (or "whip up") votes for pending legislation and occasionally to ask lawmakers to support bills to which they have expressed opposition. "You do this job with patience [and] with understanding members' districts as well as they do," he told Shesgreen. "You have to be willing to say, 'I've been to your district. You can take this vote'"—that is, voting "yes" at the request of Blunt and other Republican Party leaders will not get them in trouble in their home states.

Blunt's rise to majority whip—the third-highest position in what was then a Republican-dominated House—was viewed as remarkably swift: the Missouri representative attained the position after only six years in Washington, D.C. Prior to becoming whip, Blunt had forged close ties with the White House and had served since the start of his second two-year term in office as DeLay's chief deputy. As whip Blunt has distinguished himself by successfully guiding lobbyists to influence House members and win tight votes. "Here in Washington, Blunt has converted what had been an informal and ad hoc relationship between congressional leaders and the Washington corporate and trade community